

The Stars are Brightly Shining

Luke 21: 25-36

The First Sunday in Advent~ November 29, 2015

By Rev. Jessica C. Gregory

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The Friday before last, I stopped into a clothing store to try on some pants. I found some that I liked...until I looked at the price and saw that they were out of my price range. I looked hopefully at the sales attendant and said, “Are you having a sale?” She said, “No, but wait until next week (black Friday)—we are hearing rumors from headquarters that there may be a storewide sale for 40% off.” Perhaps I would get these pants after all—but not that night. I put them back on the rack and left. Then, on Thanksgiving I checked the store website and saw that everything was 50% off—until 3am on Friday. Thanksgiving night I made my order—and got more than just one pair of pants. It had happened just as the sale attendant had said, only with a 10% deeper discount! The temperature may have been in the 50s on Thanksgiving, but the store discounts made it clear that Christmas is on its way. Christmas is Coming! Christmas is Coming!

Our consumeristic society sent that message loud and clear to us this weekend. As far as retailers are concerned, their wait—for increased sales and full stores—is over.

In stark contrast, today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the first Sunday of the Christian year and it *begins* with waiting. We wait with great expectation to celebrate the birth of Jesus ... Immanuel ... God with us. We wait with great hope to celebrate Jesus’ coming again into this world in desperate need of saving. In this season of waiting, we focus on the things that make for the kingdom of heaven on earth: Hope, Peace, Love and Joy. As we prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the birth of our Savior, which happened so long ago, we are also alert to the possibility that at any time Jesus could return to us—in a way that we do not know. Our Scripture reminds us we must be on guard...be alert at all times.

During Advent, as we wait, we look at what we see with more intention—seeking God’s presence. We are snapped to attention, better able to observe our realities. In this season, as we are filled with hope, peace, joy and love, we are also reminded of the myriad issues in our community and world that require us to empty ourselves of them just as quickly—to heal the hurts in which we are surrounded.

Far from being a season of long-planned revelry and joy, for Christians, as Pastor Denise Anderson describes, Advent “competes with culture’s insistence that everything is great and we should continue on as we are, without care.” (“Living by the Word” 11.25.15) Advent challenges us to face the things that we prefer to ignore, because otherwise the pain in our hearts from the injustice, sadness and fear is just too much.

Such tragedy and uncertainty is described in Luke’s gospel passage for us this day. Great ambiguity and grave predictions of what is to come:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of heaven will be shaken.” I know, I know...this passage is filled with strangeness, and peculiarity that mostly lead to confusion and a desire to skip to the next chapter. But it is what the lectionary gives us for today—so here is a little information that hopefully will help. Luke is describing—in rich imagery—the “end times” of the world that will bring about the coming of God’s Kingdom. A terrible end necessary for a beautiful new beginning. To use a big theological word, this is an eschatological text—a text that describes the final event of God’s saving work that brings about the Kingdom of God. While we are not in the end-times per se, I argue that there is much confusion in today’s world that gives us a clue as to what Luke is referring. California endured four years of drought...only to recently receive massive rains that resulted in floods. On the other US coast, South Carolinians continue to pick up the few pieces that remain after historic floods ravaged their state in early October. Just days ago, Saudi Arabia got a year’s worth of rain in one day. These signs of natural creation are added to the man-made signs of distress that terrify and leave us at a loss for words: The terror acts in Paris and Mali; innocents’ lives lost by individuals killing in God’s name; the reality that, since June, three of our neighbors—people right here in Evanston—have been murdered. On a different scale, but also deeply troubling, the financial distress of our state that is resulting in families unable to afford childcare and having to make decisions that have no good choices. Add to that the seeming inability for our political leaders to listen—to one another, to their constituents—and to work together to use the power given them to make the world better. It is easy for us to ask, in all seriousness, what will come of us?

The old adage, “It has to get worse before it gets better.” comes to mind, for it is into a devastated and chaotic world that Jesus returns: “...the powers of the heaven will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” God’s promise of love will be kept. A terrible end to bring about a beautiful new beginning.

A new beginning is coming... Look up, pay attention and be ready. Be ready for stars shining brightly, embracing the darkness of the world and creating a beautiful glow.

Vincent Van Gogh's famous painting "The Starry Night," brilliantly captures our passage from Luke. As the son of a Dutch pastor—and for a time an evangelist himself—it is likely that Van Gogh was familiar with this apocalyptic Advent scripture.

He brings the words to life with swirling clouds in bold yellows and white that pop on top of a backdrop of deep dark blue and black. We see a brilliant illuminous yellow moon and incredibly bright stars bursting with light.

One is left with the choice of what to focus on—the black, looming backdrop or the brightly shining stars. Are we frightened by the picture or do we see a glimpse of God?

Just a few moments ago Pastor Michael and I baptized Oliver and Adeline. Together we celebrated their belonging to God and the commencement of their faith journeys, which they take with all of us. But before the baptism, we all answered a very important question: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

We affirmed collectively: "I DO." WE DO choose to trust in God. WE DO choose to trust that light does have the power to overcome darkness. As Christians, WE DO choose the brightly shining stars rather than the dark backdrop of foreboding blues and black.

On Wednesday evening, Thanksgiving Eve, I joined about one hundred and fifty Evanstonians from a variety of religious traditions in celebrating the gift of gratitude. Hosted by the congregation at St. Mark's Episcopal, this annual Interfaith Action of Evanston service with courage and confidence shined light into our dark world. As representatives of faith communities—ranging from Hinduism to Judaism to Presbyterianism—offered blessings from their traditions, the darkness of what separates us was embraced by the light of what brings us together...strong moral grounding and deep faith in a power beyond all of us that shines in this world.

Rev. Bret Lorie, the Senior Minister at The Unitarian/Universalist congregation in Evanston offered a sermon that affirmed the too often overlooked reality that more holds us together than keeps us apart. In his meditation, Rev. Lorie recounted his experiences with community organizing with the Industrial Areas Foundation during his ministry in San Antonio. IAF created the model of faith and broad-based organizing and, through the actions of its missions, has achieved lasting change. He reflected on how, from this ministry, he has come to deeply believe that it is not anger about the injustice of what is that most effectively brings about change, but rather it is deep gratitude for the good that is and hope in what can be as well as a strong moral compass pointing to what is right that has the power to bring people together. In these actions, darkness is embraced by light, replacing the opaque blackness with a beautiful glow of possibility and hope.

Social anthropologist and devoted member of the Anglican Church, Margaret Mead, spoke truth when she said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." It is these groups that act as bursts of bright light into our dark world. The darkness has no choice but to be embraced and the resulting soft

glow illumines all of us. We at Northminster have many of these small groups, changing our world in little ways...by making soup for the hungry, by hosting families in between homes, by journeying down to Appalachia each summer to make homes warmer, safer and drier. On this first Sunday of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Immanuel, as we continue to wait at the ready for Jesus' return, I challenge you to reflect on how your light is shining, and if there is an area in which you can make the choice to shine brightly into our dark world.

May our closing hymn be our prayer this day: Lord, Longing for Light, we wait in darkness. Longing for truth, we turn to you. Make us your own, your holy people, light for the world to see. Amen.

Works Cited

Anderson, Denise. 2015. "Living by the Word: Luke 21:25-36" in *The Christian Century*.
November 25, 2015